THE RHETORIC OF TENNYSON'S VALUES

BY

ARTHUR JAPHETH CARR

A. B., University of Michigan, 1935

A. M., Syracuse University, 1937

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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Out of the vigorous disagreements that have plagued the many attempts to judge the permanent worth of Alfred Tennyson's poetry, there arises one island of agreement, upon the major importance (if not upon the merits) of Tennyson's early poetry, especially the *Poems* of 1832 and 1842 and *In Memoriam*. There exists ample evidence, in J. M. Heath's *Commonplace Book*, the *Memoir* by Hallam Tennyson, the notes to the "Eversley" edition, and in the poetry itself, to indicate that the years about 1833 were of fruitful and enduring influence upon Tennyson's poetry. It is clear that much of *Poems* (1842) and several sections of *In Memoriam* were composed within a few weeks or months after the death of Arthur Hallam in September, 1833. The impact of that event was to be felt in Tennyson's work for the rest of his life. Further evidence of the dominance of these early years is discoverable in the inception of Tennyson's interest in the Arthurian legends and in his handling of those legends in terms of his idealization of Arthur Hallam.

It is the thesis of the present study that the permanent controlling forces of Tennyson's poetry had taken hold before the publication of *Poems* (1842) and that the course of his literary production may be interpreted as displaying variations upon attitudes expressed in the earlier poems and not undergoing progressive development. The aim of the present study is to sketch the fundamental preferences and aversions, preoccupations and desires revealed in the recurrent themes, imagery, and situations of Tennyson's early poetry, and to investigate the bearing of these implicitly stated values upon the development of Tennyson's art. Such a study may be regarded as applying to the rhetoric of Tennyson's values rather than to the logic of his ideas, the principles of his aesthetic, or the tenets of his moral system. To emphasize the rhetoric of value is to acknowledge that the values expressed in poetry are conditioned by the act of artistic

composition and that the poet addresses an audience (if only himself in another role). The immediate purpose of the present study is to show in analytical detail the stage of development which Tennyson's art had reached by October 1, 1833, and the effect upon it of the crisis delineated in *In Memoriam.*

Alfred Tennyson's poems in *Poems by Two Brothers,* his "Armageddon," *The Devil and the Lady,* and other earliest poetry show the thrust of strongly subjective experience and of desire criticized by conscience. The source of Tennyson's early poetry rises in deeply subjective fantasy and in such mystical intuitions as those described in "Armageddon." In a number of poems the young poet puts on a "mask of age"[1] and transmutes his desire into the metaphor of memory and his frustrations and fears into terms of regret and remorse. The device is a simple and effective rhetorical strategy: that which is desired is represented as that which is recollected; what is forbidden or unattainable is represented as having been had. Briefly, what is loved is lost, but imaginatively it is "recaptured" by the conceit of its having been lost, for through the equation of memory and desire it becomes imaginatively attainable. The conflict sketched in "Sense and Conscience," between the force of desire and the restraints of moral principle, is embodied recurrently in the symbolism of death, which becomes an ambivalent term for the obstacles that intrude between desire and fulfillment of desire. Death comes to stand for the weight of moral restraint yet also for the dangerously attractive threshhold that opens on free, untroubled, dream-like experience.

The poetry which Tennyson wrote at Cambridge and in the two years after his return to Somersby, early in 1831, works many variations upon the earlier themes. In "Timbuctoo" and "The Poet" mystical intuitions come to

[1]For this phrase, I am indebted to W. D. Paden's valuable monograph, *Tennyson in Egypt,* which offers an analysis of the role of erotic imagery in defining the values expressed in Tennyson's early poetry.

endorse Tennyson's belief that his poetic vocation is to reveal spiritual truths. The elements of fantasy and desire take unmistakably erotic direction in poems such as "The Sea-Fairies" and "Recollections of the Arabian Nights," but the erotic themes are criticized and tempered in the poems addressed to a gallery of Lilians, Amys, and Lisettes, as well as in the reflective poem, "Love," in which Tennyson attempts to discuss the problem of values and yet resolves the debate less in intellectual terms than in the ambivalent image of a serpent shedding his old integument. Most complex of the poems on love is *The Lover's Tale*, which employs the themes of erotic and spiritual love, the loss of the beloved, the imaginative recapture of love through visionary trances, and the attainment of moral grandeur through a magnanimous renunciation of erotic desire. The renunciation compels love to return in purely spiritual guise.

The doubts and conflicts expressed in "Perdidi Diem" and "Sense and Conscience" come back under the forms of skeptical speculations in "Supposed Confessions of a Second-rate Sensitive Mind not in Unity with Itself." Problems concerning the fulfillment of erotic wishes, the sanctions of moral value, and the meaning of the poetic vocation come to fuller expression in "A Dream of Fair Women," "The Lotos-Eaters," "The Palace of Art," and "Œnone." In this series of poems the claims of beauty and the authority of conscience are polarities of value, as are naturalism and morality, desire and self-control. In the political poems of 1832 and 1833 (including the long poem on civil disturbances which survives in the Heath *Commonplace Book*) Tennyson finds in society at large an opposition between the disorderly excesses of liberty and the gross inertia of traditional institutions. His choice cannot rest in either pole.

In the Poems of 1832 the chief development is Tennyson's use of myth and legend as a poetic strategy which encourages him to explore, with increasing success, both the nature of moral sanctions and the promptings of fantasy. What legend

and myth provide may be regarded as a kind of artificial and temporary moral universe, in which the poet achieves not a resolution of conflicts but a precarious truce. Thus, in "The Lady of Shalott" he undertakes to diminish the tyranny of fantasy by embodying the attraction of love in the symbolic and relatively objective figure of Lancelot, but the Lady of Shalott dies when she grows sick of shadows, for there is no security and stability in the objective world. In "The Palace of Art" Tennyson balances the values of sensuous and artistic enjoyment against the conscientious claims of moral intuitions, but makes no resolute choice. In "The Lotos-Eaters" the life of dream, fantasy, and erotic pleasure is defended, momentarily, on the limited although undisputed premise that the universe is amoral and that death is final. In this poem the framework of the Odysseus legend enables the poet to assume that the counterbalancing values of civic duty and morality will be understood without being stated. It is an assumption which allows him to deal more freely with his imaginative materials than he could do if he had also to make explicit the opposing and conscientious view.

"Œnone" is a skillful blending of the forces which are hardest for the poet to bring to simultaneous life. In the figure of Œnone herself the conflicting values merge. She is at once the symbol of the choice which Paris should have made (the balanced wisdom of Pallas Athena, whom Œnone praises) and of the choice which he made in fact (Aphrodite's offer of erotic bliss). In herself Œnone unites the disparate realms of pleasure and of truth, just as in the poem as a whole Tennyson's highly evocative description of the scenery and the seductively beautiful goddesses colors his recommendation of ascetic self-control. Yet Tennyson had not found any objective standard by which to measure and maintain the balance of the powers. It was a problem that had animated many a debate of the "Apostles" at Cambridge and had been reflected in Tennyson's attitude toward Reform and his engagement, in 1830, on the side of the Torrijos

expedition, an abortive attempt to restore constitutional government in Spain.

In *In Memoriam* and the poems which encircle it—"Ulysses" (which bears the date, October 20, 1833, in the Heath *Commonplace Book*), "The Two Voices," "Tithonus," "Locksley Hall," and "Morte d'Arthur" (begun before the end of 1833)—Tennyson works to re-assemble the precarious structure of personal values wrecked by the death of Arthur Hallam. In snatching from Tennyson the man he most loved and upon whom he depended in many ways, the death of Hallam reproduced in the most serious imaginable terms the situation of symbolic loss (followed by imaginative fulfillment) that Tennyson had exploited in his earlier poems. *In Memoriam* is a somber culmination of the themes that dominate Tennyson's earlier poetry. The loss of Hallam is an affront to Tennyson's desires (as revealed by the amatory tone of expressed grief and by the sensuous imagery of eventual reunion) and to his subjectively established intellectual principles (as revealed in the intellectual problems phrased by grief and answered by his symbolic reunion with Hallam). The spiritual autobiography set forth in *In Memoriam* traces the re-establishment of Tennyson's ideals, now to be sustained and measured by the subjective standard of what Arthur Hallam came to mean to Tennyson. Reunion on an ideal plane is achieved in a series of approaches, through the dreams of the past, the flash of "living soul" in section XCV, and the dream of the future in section CIII.

The effect of the imaginative reunion is that Tennyson is able to see existence as a continuum (implied also in "Ulysses" and "Locksley Hall") in which the eventual result of individually unsatisfactory events if a far-off divine event which mixes the present in the future, the material in the ideal, and transmutes present evil into evolutionary good. These ideas, never very distinct, correspond rather closely to the terms of Tennyson's subjective reunion with his friend, and they are further qualified by Tennyson's inclina-

tion to glorify loss itself. The effect of that qualification is almost to negate the meaning of progress in the material world and to render insoluble the problem of evil when it appears in practical affairs. Because Hallam came to symbolize both the realm of ideally fulfilled desire and the sanction of mystical intuitions, Tennyson has only to associate his friend with nature, ethics, or politics to find that the values invested in Hallam are spread to his surroundings. In this way Tennyson solves the problem of an objective world that is meaningless and conscienceless, and of a society threatened with chaos. In *In Memoriam* the solution comes by emphasizing the "inner" meaning of evolution: Man's spiritual destiny, as forecast symbolically in Hallam. Apparent discord may be accepted as contributing, somehow, to a grander harmony. Evil is only the condition under which good can operate. In "Locksley Hall" and *Maud,* social chaos, even war, is seen to be redemptive when it eases the smart of personal disappointment or promises an eventual, though incalculably distant and dimly visible, consummation.

The transfiguration of Hallam (as also of King Arthur) is in some sense only a pseudo-transfiguration. The ideals consecrated by his death and his assumption into a wholly ideal existence embody the unresolved oppositions of value that have been traced in Tennyson's earlier poetry. The transformation allows the poet to preserve almost unchanged both spheres of subjective value, the erotic (or naturalistic) and the religious (or mystical). The great example is his faith in his "Mother-Age," an idea with no content whatsoever; it is simply the acceptance of things as they are. Such an acceptance might be salutary were it not for the consequence that through the illusion that high spiritual sanctions are operative, things as they are become gilded with the hues of the ideal and confused with the world of dreams. Another consequence is that Tennyson's ideal society, as discernible in the *Idylls of the King,* is damagingly like his "Mother-Age." Tennyson is further impelled, by feeling that material defeat and death are avenues to spiritual value, to glorify

that society by depicting its disintegration and the apotheosis of its creator.

The illimitable future which confers value upon the present and the past and moves the material world along toward the ideal is largely the negation of objective value. A belief in progress which requires extension on an infinite scale is indistinguishable from a belief in interminable change. A moral system which flourishes only by waiving the criteria of moral judgment (in the discrimination between good and evil) becomes identical with amoral subjectivism incapable of winnowing reason from desire. A faith in immortality founded on intuitions that are themselves distrusted is exposed to every gust of doubt in a mind emptied of the power of criticism. It is for this reason that Tennyson remains immured in the world of things as they are, sometimes mistaking them for the ideal and unhappy when he discovers his mistakes. It is in this sense that Tennyson was "representative" of his age. He could not free himself from it. He could not oppose to the "age," or to any particular doctrine, an ideal more substantial than his dream of the future, which was only the mask of his "Mother-Age" and the projection of his personal desires. It is significant that *Maud* and the *Idylls of the King* and even *The Princess* are studies in the disintegration of personal relationships or of social organisms largely ideal. The attempted re-integration of values at the conclusions of these works affirms the validity of things as they are: the subjugation of woman in marriage; warfare as the realization of personal and social ideals; and the morality of the Victorian, Protestant, upper middle-class.

If the confusion of values which resulted from the identification of intensely personal experience with intellectual principles accounts for much of what is unsatisfactory in Tennyson's later work, the intensity of the experience and the tendency to seek value in loss gave vigor and poignancy to poems as diverse as "Frater Ave aque Vale" and

"The Oak" and motivated Tennyson's revisions of the poems which he had written before October, 1833. The Tennysonian theme was the transition of personal value through loss or death or dream toward the ideal. His genius reaches its characteristic utterance in poems of incipient mood and of static "atmosphere," idealizing a mood rather than a moral principle or a concept. It is to this talent that "Tithonus," "Ulysses," and "Morte d'Arthur" owe their distinction, as do also those sections of *In Memoriam* expressing moods of acute sorrow, gradual relief, and ecstacy. In these Tennyson was able to project wholly in imagery and situation those ideals of mood which he was to formulate elsewhere as intellectual principles. The never perfectly muffled disharmonies of his subjective values lend to the idealized moods those tensions of emotion and minglings of disparate attitudes, the pulse of ambiguity, without which the highest artistry falls dead.

To study the rhetoric of Tennyson's values is to watch the concurrence of private experience with public utterance. To examine only Tennyson's formally expressed ideas is to overlook somewhat the non-rational elements in his poetry; to analyze only the poet's expressed emotions obscures the communicative and objective functions of art. The bearing of Tennyson's values upon his intellectual development is illustrated by considering the findings of other descriptive studies, such as Emory Mooney, Jr.'s, *Tennyson and Modern Science* and William Hunton's *Tennyson and the Victorian Political Milieu.* Tennyson's inability to keep pace with the "march of mind" in his own century may be interpreted as not simply a deficiency of intellectual strength and courage but as the result of his fixation upon an experience, and its corollary ideas, which did not lie wholly within his volition and conscious interests.

The present study does not attempt to discuss systematically the implications of Tennyson's position as manifest in *Maud,* the *Idylls of the King,* his plays, and the late poems.

There are also further subjects inviting consideration. It is clear, for example, that employment of an ornate style frequently signalizes Tennyson's interest in erotic themes. A careful analysis of imagery, theme, and value might show that the ornate style carries along tacitly those erotic impulses more openly expressed before 1833. There is a question, also, of Tennyson's attitude toward women and of their function in his scheme of values. Tennyson's preoccupation with the humiliation of admirable and beautiful women may indicate that their humiliation made them seem more beautiful or that Tennyson was partly impelled to reject his ideal of womanhood. There is, similarly, a problem concerning the theme of asceticism in Tennyson's poetry. The theme appears in the foreground of "St. Simeon Stylites," a study in good and evil too complex to be interpreted as a simple rejection of the ascetic ideal.

Without attempting to judge the permanent worth of Tennyson's literary performance, it is clear that the situation in which Tennyson found himself may be viewed as a crisis in the development of an earlier Romanticism, with its full exploitation of the senses and the sensibilities of the individual artist and with its apocalyptic truths. What gradually emerges, and Tennyson's poetry is an important stage in the process, is a sensibility no less insistent than before upon the essential role of the individual but more and more deeply troubled and sometimes paralyzed by the transitory and uncertain nature of the truths discovered or revealed. In extremity, the poet would come to doubt even the minimum sufficiency of his artistic medium. It is a position, in all its infinity of idiosyncrasy, which the arts attained between the two World Wars. In rare instances, such as Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a work of art might still become the symbol for a state of mind or a crisis of sensibility widely felt. Or the artist might attach himself to the cause of polemic truth, social or religious. Tennyson's effort to establish objective truth upon a foundation of subjective values brings him into relationship at

many points with such writers, as different from him and from each other, as T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and Aldous Huxley. It is thus that the process returns to social castigation, to the glorification of Saint Thomas à Becket, and to mystical ecstacy.

VITA

Arthur Japheth Carr, son of Margaret McAuslan and Arthur Wellesley Carr was born on 21 April, 1914, in Bad Axe, Michigan, and reared in the home of his uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Japheth Hind. He graduated from the public schools of Bad Axe, Michigan, in June, 1931, received the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in English from the University of Michigan in June, 1935, and the degree of Master of Arts from Syracuse University in June, 1937. From 1937 until June, 1940, he was Instructor in English at Syracuse University. Since September, 1940, he has been an Assistant in English at the University of Illinois. From March, 1943, until December, 1945, he served in the United States Naval Reserve as a communications officer. In December, 1941, he married Marion Elizabeth Grudier. He has two daughters, Jennifer Marion, born in February, 1944, and Alice Lockwood, born in May, 1946. He is a member of Phi Beta Kappa.